

Running beside Station Road was a delightful stream in which I used to catch large minnows, delicious freshly fried. It was protected by a white wooden fence from our house to Little Ayton corner, where was situated the listed and, to me, the often convenient convenience, the red metal pissotière. Opposite the Quaker Meeting House and burial ground was Harbottle's, the joiner and undertaker, and Thistlethwaites the Grocer. William Thistlethwaite, my uncle, was known as an ardent Quaker, but he was one of very few bad debts on the books of my father's firm, W&M Pumphrey Ltd., at Thornaby-on-Tees, from which William bought all his sugar, and I was present at Friends' Meeting for Worship to see my father's discomfort when it was William's turn to read the Quakers' Code of Conduct which included the commandment, "Thou shalt pay thy debts promptly". It was to and from these Sunday morning meetings that Sir John Pease Fry and Henry Kitching, also Quakers, were driven in state by their coachmen from their homes at 'Cleveland Lodge' and The Grange'. Henry Kitching had the unfortunate habit of going to sleep leaning on his walking stick. Rather unfortunately, I thought, his son Noel sat strategically behind him so that when the snoring became embarrassingly loud, he could reach forward with his right leg and knock the stick away; the resulting explosion bringing welcome relief to a small boy who had to sit through the long hour of the meeting, sometimes in almost complete silence.



There was Worthy Pearson's, the newsagent, and, opposite the much used village pump on the High Green, the Royal Oak. The Post Office was where it is now, but any telephone call was passed through the Post Office's switchboard, making the operator aware of any conversation to which she chose to listen. It was said that really hot gossip took only five minutes to spread from one end of the village to the other. Adjacent was 'Porky Johnson's, the pork butcher, whose pigs, kept behind the shop, were taken for slaughter, with sheep, behind the butcher's shop on the raised pavement beyond Suggits. On the High Green opposite the Post Office were Doctors Stewart and Murray, to whose surgery I would often take myself when yet another skid on my bicycle on the rough dirt roads re-opened the ever-present wounds on my bare knees. Many times also did my father administer to me (my mother being too sympathetic to my pleadings) one of the doctors' three remedies for almost any ailment (The Devil's Brew I called them), castor oil, licorice and gregory powder.

Between the Post Office and Captain Cook's schoolroom was The British School, now the Library. My mother, who had herself been a teacher at the Quaker Ackworth School, near Pontefract, enjoyed telling the true story of its headmistress, a short, stout, rather bow-legged woman, who came into a classroom of giggling children, suggesting that one of them had said something at her expense. Threatened by the whole class being kept in, a small girl, near to tears, eventually confessed, "I only said that when thou walks, thou waddles like a duck."

At the lower end of the village, at the beginning of Easby Road on the other side of the stone bridge, stood the stone cottage so shamefully put up for auction in 1935 by Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Dixon who, I am so sad to record, were relatives of mine. It was removed to Australia, where it attracts millions of visitors, for on its lintel are engraved 1755 and the letter C above the letter G, the initials of Captain Cook's father and mother.

Behind the cottage was a delightful stream which passed under a small stone bridge carrying the Easby Road, and opposite was the blacksmith. He had a tame crow, known locally as a raven. It was his habit to take the bird with him to the church on Sundays, perched on his shoulder. Understandably, the vicar became increasingly annoyed by the bird's presence, and rumour had it that he was to do away with it. But the congregation rallied to its defence, and a delegation was sent to the vicarage. "Noo then, Vicar," said its spokesman, "Vicar may go, or t'raaven may go, but I'll tell thee this... if owt goes, it won't be t'raaven."

Rivalling the attraction, to me, of the blacksmith at work, was the near-by fish and chip shop, 2p in today's money securing a large portion of each, preferably eaten from a newspaper. At the beginning of Guisborough Road was the imposing, if not forbidding, stone-built Police Station with its lock-up, and near the church the Village Hall sometimes showed silent films with a lady piano accompanist. The police sergeant and his constable kept a watchful eye on the village, on one occasion administering justice without today's cost and paperwork of the juvenile court and probation service. On the way up Station Road were some gas lamps and I was taking such careful aim at one of these with my catapult that I did not see the sergeant creeping up behind me. He grabbed me and gave me six of the best with his stout stick. I had not even fired my missile, but I knew better than to run to my father, and lost all interest in gas lamps.

What I consider remarkable is that so many scenes in Great Ayton are the same today as they were when I was a small boy. Sadly, the villagers no longer leave their doors unlocked at night, as they did then, and no more does the

village choir, some twenty-five strong, sing carols by lantern light in the front garden of my old home on Christmas Eve, or the Salvation Army band play there on Christmas morning, its men and women having walked, carrying their instruments, seven miles from Guisborough across snow-covered High Nab and Gribdale Moor. And no longer do red squirrels tap on the dining room window of that house in Station Road for their breakfast of nuts.

Bevan Pumphrey  
Midhurst, West Sussex, August, 1998

Note:

BEVAN PUMPHREY (Friends School 1921-26) was also the grandson of RALPH DIXON, the school's second superintendent and great grandson of Ralph's father GEORGE, the founding head.